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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KMPI KPAO KDEM TS

SUBJECT: SAMIA ABBOU: GOT PRESSURE LESS SINCE GANZOUI'S  
DEPARTURE

REF: A. TUNIS 1565

- 1B. TUNIS 1424
- 1C. TUNIS 1402
- 1D. TUNIS 1253
- 1E. TUNIS 1254
- 1F. TUNIS 730
- 1G. TUNIS 425

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson, for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a June 30 meeting, Samia Abbou, wife of jailed lawyer/writer Mohamed Abbou, told Poloff that GOT harassment of her and her family had diminished following the removal of Mohamed Ali Ganzoui as Interior Ministry Secretary of State of National Security on June 5. However, she claimed her husband was still suffering from poor detention conditions and sought further USG intervention to secure her husband's release. End Summary.

12. (C) Poloff met with Samia Abbou on June 30. Her husband Mohamed Abbou (Ref F) has served nearly a year and a half of a three and a half year sentence on charges of defaming the judiciary and posing a threat to public order (1.5 year sentence), stemming from an on-line article he wrote comparing Tunisian prisons to Abu Ghraib, and a separate charge of assault (2 year sentence). Mrs. Abbou described frequent harassment from alleged GOT security agents in past months, claiming that police followed her everywhere, were constantly stationed around her house, and stopped her en route to visit her husband at El Kef Prison (Northwest Tunisia). She said that for weeks, an unidentified person would climb on her balcony late at night, rattling doors and windows, and severely frightening her school-age children. However, she claimed that in the past month most of the harassment has stopped, a development she attributed to the departure of Mohamed Ali Ganzoui as Secretary of State for National Security in the Ministry of Interior (Ref C).

(NOTE: Ganzoui was rumored to be responsible for heavy-handed tactics directed against civil society in Tunisia since his appointment following the UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in November 2005. END NOTE.) Although she said she is still followed, and police continue to be stationed at her residence, she is no longer stopped when traveling to visit her husband, and her family has received no more late night harassing visits.

13. (C/NF) Mrs. Abbou claimed that her husband still suffers from poor prison conditions, mainly because of harassment from co-detainees in his shared cell, who according to her "constantly verbally harass him." She said that prison authorities doubled the number of prisoners in Abbou's cell, and that several times his co-detainees told him that if he signed a confession that what he did was wrong, he would be set free. Mrs. Abbou called this, "an effort to humiliate him." She also said that one of the co-detainees had made

negative comments about Abbou's young daughter and wife. Although she did not allege any serious physical abuse, she said Mohamed Abbou has several times asked prison authorities for a change of cellmate assignment to no avail. Mrs. Abbou also complained about the level and breadth of medical treatment available to her husband, saying that doctors were always accompanied by prison guards, and "weren't allowed to do their jobs," and that services such as blood analysis were not available. She claimed Mohamed Abbou was suffering from rheumatism. (NOTE: ICRC confirmed to Emboffs that they had visited and had lengthy discussions with Mohamed Abbou during their inspection of El Kef Prison).

¶14. (C) Samia Abbou sought continued pressure from the USG to release Abbou, and when reminded by Poloff of numerous public statements and private discussions on her husband's case, she expressed disbelief that "Ben Ali can ignore the United States." Mrs. Abbou was hopeful that her husband might be released on July 25, Tunisian National Day, an occasion often marked by Presidential pardons of prisoners. She said that of the two charges, one for publishing critical writings and one for assault, the charge stemming from his writings carried a year and a half sentence -- "a sentence which Mohamed has already served." Therefore, she thought it would be likely time that the GOT would allow his release. She said the assault charge had been invented by the GOT, and that the real reason Abbou had been jailed was because of an article he posted immediately preceding his arrest in March 2005, in which he had criticized the Trabelsi family of Ben Ali's wife Leila. Mrs. Abbou hypothesized that it was Leila Ben Ali, and not the President, who was behind Mohamed Abbou's arrest and detention.

¶15. (C) Comment: Samia Abbou's comment that she has felt less GOT security pressure since the removal of Ganzoui from the

MOI dovetails with other reports of civil society meetings which have been successfully held post-Ganzoui without heavy GOT interference (Ref B), and prevailing thought among civil society that Ganzoui was directly responsible for the increased crackdown on independent NGOs and opposition groups following WSIS.

¶16. (C) Comment (cont'd): While Samia Abbou noted positive developments in her treatment, our GOT interlocutors continue to be frustratingly obstinate on Abbou, refusing any substantive dialogue on the case and contradicting themselves as to the nature and details of the charges against him. In the past year, Presidential Advisor Ben Dhia has told Ambassador that Abbou "crossed a line, and should not have criticized the President", President Ben Ali claimed he "only learned of the case in the papers" (Ref E), Foreign Minister Abdallah refused to discuss the case with Deputy Secretary Zoellick (Ref D), and MFA Secretary of State Saida Chtioui has said that Abbou was charged only for assault. While Abbou remains the most high profile political prisoner in Tunisia, the GOT appears in no hurry to rid itself of this stain on its human rights record. However, continued pressure from the USG, the EU, and international and Tunisian civil society could lead to an early release of Abbou, via a Presidential pardon, like the March release of several prominent An-Nahdha leaders (Ref G). (NOTE: In a recent resolution on Tunisia, the EU Parliament called for the release of Abbou. (Ref A) END NOTE). End Comment.

HUDSON